

## SELF-ACCESS CENTER AND STUDENTS' ATTITUDE ON BEING AUTONOMOUS LEARNERS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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### Abstract

The recent student-centered learning trend in language education has put more emphasis on students' independent English Language Learning as well as more responsibility towards their success in the learning process. However, some teachers still believe that teachers should control most learning process due to the learning success. As supporting resource to English Language Learning, Self-Access Center has been admitted to be significant in language learning success. This study aimed to find out how Self-Access Center facilities were able to influence students' attitude towards autonomy in learning. The research was descriptive qualitative. The data collection was conducted by triangulating the three instruments: questionnaires, in-depth semi structured interview and student-attendance-record. This study took place in Widya Mandala Secretarial Academy Surabaya, Indonesia, in its Self-Access Center facility. The findings were to show the students' perception on Self-Access Center as a determining factor in their learning success, and how the center itself affected their attitude towards autonomy in learning.

*Keywords: Self-Access Center, Autonomous Learner, Autonomy in Learning*

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background of The Study

That learning is an individual process and made special by the individual unique features in one's mind has been believed for ages. In language learning, there are two types of general approaches to describe the type of aid offered by a teacher, tutor, trainer or peer to support learning. The first one is conventional learning using classroom and its facilities; the second one is individual learning or independent learning.

The idea of independent learning comes in line with autonomy

in learning. The concept can be applied to any various tools which serve the function of autonomous learning. As argued by Jacobs (2015):

...learners construct their own networks of knowledge by collaborating with others as they connect new information to their present knowledge and interests. Because each person is different, students come away from the same activity or lesson with different individual representations of the ideas studied. Teachers can facilitate this construction work,

but the key is what happens in each individual's mind,...

This research aimed to describe how autonomy in learning was facilitated by a facility called Self-Access Center. A description of how students were supported and helped by Self-Access Center facilities in terms of foreign language learning related to a particular topic and engaging in various language skills, is presented here.

The focus of learning being observed was autonomy in learning EFL (English as Foreign Language) and the secondary focus is other foreign language learning. The focus of observation was to see how the students learning habit was influenced by the Self-Access Center facilities and how the center affected the students' autonomy in learning.

Before proceeding to the research problem, the background of the institution is presented here. Widya Mandala Secretarial Academy Surabaya, or Akse WMS, offers a 3-year-program which results various input of students; students with high English proficiency and students with low English proficiency; students with maximum foreign language and technology exposure and students with minimum exposure; students with motivation to get the best career and students with motivation to get a job as quickly as possible; students with the independent learning habit and students with dependent learning habit; students who are fast learners and students who are slow learners; students who are interested to know details of their learning material and students who are interested more to the practice of the material they learn.

### **(This should be in the background of the study)**

Dealing with EFL (English Language Learning), there are at least two major approaches for the students in English Language Learning. The first is direct learning and the second is indirect learning. Direct learning of a language means that a learner learns a language by using direct tools of learning such as grammar exercises, vocabulary practices, and other language skills practices. **(What about Indirect Learning)**

Based on the writers own experience in teaching EFL, beside these two major approaches, there are other approaches: dependent and independent learning. The more popular term for independent learning is autonomy in learning.

In line with the approaches of learning, teachers have been struggling to find ways of appropriate learning methods in EFL. Considering the different speed or pace of learning, Autonomy in learning method becomes one significant alternative to consider for EFL learning. To support this approach of learning, the institution, Akse WMS, created a Self Access Center facility.

### **Statement of The Problem**

It has been shown by the recent researches about students' perception towards the way they learn and the connection with how they become successful in their learning. In this research, we were trying to bring up the issue of autonomy in learning facilitated by our Self Access Center (SAC).

Therefore, this study was to find the effect of Self-Access Center to the students' perception on their

learning process, to help the learner moves from his/ her present level of knowledge/ skills mastery to the higher one. The study described how students think of the usefulness of Self-Access Center facilities to assist them learning foreign language, especially English, independently. Therefore, the study tried to answer the following questions:

**Major Question:** What's the perception of students on self-directed instruction activity and teacher's directed instruction activity? How do the students develop their learning autonomy at SAC?

**Minor Questions:**

1. Did the students have a habit of independent learning or autonomous learning before they know Self-Access Center facilities?
2. Does SAC generally support the students' independence in learning? How?

### **The Purpose of The Study**

The study aimed to find out the students' perception towards autonomy in learning English Language Skills at Widya Mandala Secretarial Academy Surabaya, as having been affected by the existence of Self-Access Center facility in term of their being autonomous. The students who used Self-Access Center facilities in their learning were interviewed and asked to fill up questionnaires; their attendance record was also analyzed.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The study is based on the theory of Learner Centered Approach (Nunan, 1988, in Diaz, 2010) and Constructivism with its Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) by

Vygotsky ((1978) in Lipscomb, Swanson, and West (2008)), stating that every student has a level of achievement in learning, somewhere between their dependent level (a level where they are dependent to the teachers in finishing the task given) and independent level (a level where they are able to work independently). The zone where the students are able to perform a task completion only if assisted by a more capable peer, tutor, media, and necessary resources, is called ZPD. In the ZPD, students during their learning process are to achieve their independent level, in which they are able to perform a task independently. The goal of every learner is when they are able to perform any learned material in autonomy (Nunan, 1988 in Diaz, 2010). A better understanding on the process of how Self-Access Center affected students' autonomous learning was described in this research.

### **The Significance of The Study**

Self-Access Center is based on the principle of 'individual and independent/ autonomy in learning' experienced by a learner to minimize the pressure on time constraint limitation and maximize the learner's potential to learn and discover. Correspondingly, the study was expected to yield some contribution to ELT (English Language Teaching) techniques, focusing on language skills for students.

Another significant contribution of the study was to improve the current classroom practice in teaching and learning foreign language.

### **The Essence of Self-Access Center**

Self-Access Center facilities have been subjects to many researches related to autonomy in learning. Some academicians even mentioned that Self-Access Center is the ‘buzz word’ of autonomy in learning (Little, 1991 in Diaz, 2010) due to its nature which facilitates learners to learn independently (in autonomy). Self-Access Center provides the chances for learners to decide the material to study and assumes greater responsibility for their own language development” (Littlejohn, 1997 p.181 in Diaz, 2010). Miller and Rogerson-Revell (in Ortiz, 2010) categorized SACs into four groups according to the organization form, material resources and the function. They are: The four types of SACs are:

1. Menu-driven: Here, the materials are classified, and the materials stored either in soft copies or in hard copies. It is called menu-driven because each time a learner needs to get access to the system, they can refer to the menu. The SACs are usually in universities, used by university students. However, the users need to be trained on how to use the system.
2. Supermarket: it is a self-access center where the learner has the opportunity to look around and choose what to study. The system displays materials under categories such as: listening, reading, games, etc. The categories are highlighted with different colors. The end-users are students of teacher training study program.
3. Controlled-access: a system where learners are directed to a specific set of materials by their tutors. It

is directed to engineering and science students.

4. Open-access: This system is usually part of a library. The material is open for use by students studying English and other library students.

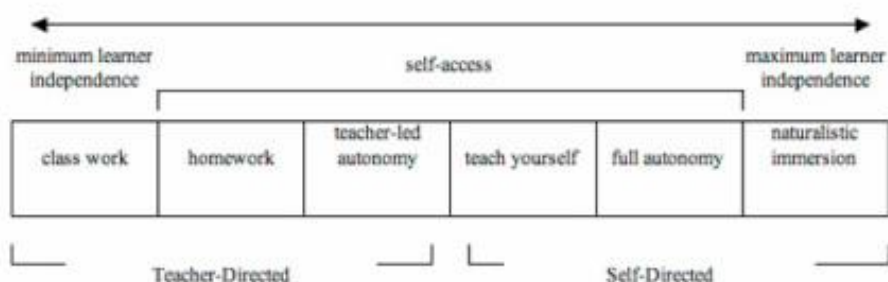
The categories mentioned above were made taking into account Self-Access Centers created in countries like France, Malaysia and China.

Self-Access Center at Widya Mandala Secretarial Academy Surabaya (WMSAS) adapts the first, second, and third types of SAC mentioned by Miller and Rogerson-Revell. It composes almost all of its materials concerning language skills, like Reading, Writing, and Speaking as well as materials concerning language components such as vocabularies and Structures using color-code paper. In addition, the materials are displayed in such an organized way that the students can easily access them. It’s just like going to supermarket where students can choose whether to take Vocabulary exercises or the others. However, for the listening material, WMSAS SAC adapts the menu-driven system. While for the compulsory class, the counselor has chosen the materials for the students. (controlled-access).

Self-access is often used in line with other terms for autonomy. Many researchers and practitioners hardly show the clear connection between autonomy and self-access. However, Sheerin (1989) in Hadley (2007) defined self-access as materials selected by learners to reinforce a traditional teacher-led classroom. This definition can be elaborated to define more understanding of autonomy. Self-

access can be connected to materials, people and other resources that learners can benefit to learn independently. These learners may or may not be related to traditional class or course. The idea is that self-access gives students freedom to choose the materials and activities for their individual learning experience.

Extending this definition, we find that self-access can stretch out into many types of autonomous learning. Figure 1 describes an adapted version of Jones's (1998) in Hadley (2007) spectrum. In this figure, it is seen that self-access stretches across all different types of autonomy.



**Figure 1. Jones' diagram representing scope of study with adaptations to show self-access (Jones, 1998, p. 379)**

**Figure 1. Jones' diagram representing scope of study with adaptations to show self-access (Jones, 1998, p. 379) in Hadley (2007)**

There is a huge need for more research regarding self-access centers. Cotterall and Reinders (2001) in McMurry, B. L., Tanner, M. W., & Anderson, N. J. (2010) suggested four areas that can improve the effectiveness of these centers.

1. Self-access center administrators need to explore learners' beliefs.
2. Students need an effective initial orientation to the self-access center.
3. Administrators is supposed to provide on-going support to students.
4. There have to be more connections between the self-access center and the classroom.

## **Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning**

In a plenary address, Nunan (2000) in Hadley (2007) stated: "Autonomy implies a capacity to exercise control over one's own learning." He meant that autonomous learners are better be able to define the overall focus of their learning, take a dynamic role in the management of the learning process, and obtain freedom to select appropriate learning resources and activities. Benson and Voller (1997) in Hadley (2007) made almost the same claims. They emphasized that autonomy means taking charge of one's own education and learning.

Educators can promote autonomy in learning, to some points. Sheerin (cited in Benson & Voller, 1997 in Hadley, 2007) said that teachers have an important role in helping learners to become more

autonomous. Thanasoulas (2000) in Hadley (2007) argued that autonomous learning is successful when the cognitive and metacognitive strategies take part in the learner's ability. Anderson (2002) in Hadley (2007) defined metacognition simply as thinking about thinking.

Cognitive strategies deal a lot with the input such as repetition or notetaking. Thanasoulas (2000) in Hadley (2007) implies that developing these skills will help the overall improvement of autonomy in language learners. Wenden (1998) in Hadley (2007) defined metacognition as the "facts learners acquire about their own thinking processes as they are applied and used to gain knowledge and acquire skills in varied situations" (p. 34). Metacognitive strategies are not operating in the same way that cognitive strategies are. Metacognitive strategies have something to do with learning about how an individual learns. Techniques such as self-monitoring and self-evaluation belong to these strategies. These are key points of self-access. If self-access really involves self-monitoring and self-evaluation, then self-access centers are important in assisting learners to be more autonomous.

### **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)**

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) was first introduced by Vygotsky, an expert in constructivism of learning, the adapted to the present approach of teaching. He defined ZPD as: *the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem*

*solving and the level of potential developments as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.* (Vygotsky, 1978). This definition of ZPD has been expanded and elaborated into many practices of learning, across its original context. For instance, the learning approach whose underlying theory is ZPD is no longer applied only to children (compared to Vygotsky's phrase: *under adult guidance*) but also to adult learners (see Bodrova and Leong (1998), Barnard and Campbell (2005), Kim (2005), and Lin (2006)).

The idea of ZPD is actually taking place in a transition period of learning, between being a dependent learner and being an independent learner. During the transition, a learner needs help by *adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers* (Vygotsky, 1978). The goal of the guidance is to make the learner becomes more independent. There are two points inferred from ZPD. The first, learning is a process (it requires a *zone*, an area of time and learning, a length of period). The second, learning operates the best in a collaboration (with more capable peers).

In terms of autonomy in learning, ZPD serves as the area where a learner can explore more his or her potential ability to learn new things in autonomy. The term 'autonomy' does not necessarily mean that the learner performs the learning without help, but more to the philosophical meaning that the learner has more freedom in arranging his or her own pace, goal, and method in learning. In some practical experiences, the learning might be

facilitated by more capable peers and tutors, as well as the supporting facilities such as multimedia, computer software and other aiding tools. However, the key concept remains the same, that the learners take control on his or her learning activity.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was qualitative with limited use of numbers and figures only for describing tools. The design of the study was Exploratory Research. The general pattern of the research adopts the Classroom Action Research pattern: planning, acting, developing, and reflecting. This study investigated the students' perception of autonomy in learning who were performing independent learning in the Self-Access Center facilities.

To conduct the research on investigating these research questions, the following steps of Classroom Action Research were conducted: planning, acting, developing, and reflecting.

Planning means identifying the topic, gathering preliminary information, reviewing related literature (as suggested by Mertler (2009), and an additional steps: designing an action plan, creating questionnaires for evaluating students' learning habit, then arranging a set of semi-structured interview questions.

Developing an action plan was carried out after doing these two steps. Step one covered these elements: implementing the action plan, collecting the data through the research tools (questionnaires, semi structured interview, and students' activity record at the facilities of

appointed Self-Access Center. Step two was the analysis and the interpretation of the data. After the data analysis and interpretation, an important outcome: the findings, was used to develop the next action plan for developing and improving the Self-Access Center Facilities. This developed action plan was the important goal of any exploratory research since this developed action plan was the tools to describe the result of the research. Reflecting the whole process of the existing research was the last step of a research cycle.

Due to the Exploratory Research nature, and the purpose of the Classroom Action Research Methodology: to improve the class' teaching-learning-activity, the participants in the research are the existing students in Self-Access Center facilities in Widya Mandala Secretarial Academy Surabaya. However, in this case, the one being developed is the independent learning activity, by knowing how the participants' learning habit and their perception towards independent/ autonomous learning

Due to the nature of qualitative study, the objective of the study was to explain the process: describe how *media and tools in Self-Access Center* plays their roles in helping students to learn independently. The purpose of the research was to generate the students' perception of how autonomy in learning helped them in learning foreign languages.

Qualitatively, the research instruments were the writers themselves. They observed the learning process conducted by the students, collected the data, and

analyzed the data. The researchers were assisted by questionnaires, semi-structured interview, and students' attendance record at Self-Access Center.

The data collected were in two types: qualitative data and quantitative data. The qualitative data were the transcript of students' semi-structured interview result.

The second type of data collected were the quantitative data. This data were gained from the statistics of questionnaires and students activity record at the Self-Access Center facilities. However, the research did not process the quantitative data further because the nature of the research was not quantitative. The quantitative data served for descriptive purpose, to support the findings which were gained through the interview.

## DISCUSSION

The data analysis was conducted for the two types of data.

**Table 1. The percentage of students perceiving Self Directed Activity improving language skills mastery**

Year/ level	Higher Level Competency students	Lower Level Competency students
2013	65%	95%
2014	75%	89%
2015	95%	74%

For the higher level students in 2013 and 2014 batches, the percentage of students agreeing that self-directed activity improves language skill mastery is relatively lower than the lower level competency ones. Only in the 2015 batch, the percentage is higher than the lower one.

For the the interview results were grouped, decoded, and then interpreted using categories. The researchers then triangulated the result of previous data analysis with the analysis result of students' activity record statistics at the facilities.

## Self-Directed Instruction Activity and Teacher's Directed Instruction

In terms of students' perception towards Self-Directed Instruction Activity and Teacher's Directed Instruction Activity, More than a half of them perceived that Self-Directed Activity improves their language skills mastery and supported the Teacher's Directed Instruction in the classroom. The students who perceived this way come from the 2013, 2014, and 2015 academic year. The following table extracted from the questionnaires shows the percentage of students perceiving Self Directed Activity improving language skills mastery:

These percentage figures are best explained this way: The students from batch 2013 and 2014 had done their compulsory program of attending Self Access Center for doing independent exercises in English Structure and Reading subjects in the previous semester. Therefore, they had little necessity for working independently on Structure



and Reading exercises. However, they admitted that regardless the compulsory program, Self-Access Center still improved their language skills mastery. On the other hand, for the 2015 batch students, they still did their compulsory program for Structure and Reading. Consequently, they still felt the necessity of working on the independent exercises. Therefore, the higher level competency students, the ones who usually pursued high academic achievement, felt the needs of independent exercises more than the lower level ones.

From the findings, it is obvious that Self-Access Center, whether the students had the compulsory program or not, was perceived as assisting the students to improve their language skills mastery. The other implication of the finding would be that Self-Access Center had been perceived as a support to the

classroom teaching, or the teacher's directed instruction activity.

### **The Students' Habit of Autonomous Learning**

From the previous part, the role of Self-Access Center (SAC) in learning is to support the learners independently or autonomously. The students' changing experience in their learning habit after they know about SAC was the subjects of the study, whether the existence of SAC change their learning habit.

From the interview result, it is known that the habit of independent learning began to grow after knowing SAC, in terms of being more autonomous in their learning style, with limited scale of help from more capable peers, tutors, assistants, seeking for more independent resources (social media, *google translate*, *youtube*, etc.) by themselves and try to solve learning problem by themselves.

**Table 2. Habit of Autonomous Learning Before and After Knowing Self-Access Center (SAC)**

Academic Year	Upper Level Competency		Lower level Competency	
	Before	after	before	after
2013				
	100%	100%	40%	80%
2014				
	50%	70%	25%	50%
2015				
	50%	75%	25%	50%

From the table extracted from the questionnaires, it is concluded that the learning habit of all students from every batch experienced changing

after knowing SAC. The students in each batch, from higher and lower competency level (except batch 2013, in which the higher level one

experienced no differences before and after knowing SAC) changed their learning habit to become more independent and autonomous. However, the students of higher level competency from batch 2013 mentioned that they did not change their learning habit. They had been autonomous learners even when they had not known SAC. This phenomenon can happen because the interviewees were the students who had been practicing autonomy in learning before they knew SAC. Based on other researches in learning, it had been proven that indeed usually independent learners relatively achieved higher academic achievement.

The interview also showed that the students developed some traits after having sessions in SAC: having better time management, improving confidence, using more language skills, adding more vocabulary, improving their grammar, growing their learning motivation, enjoying arrange learning at their own pace and speed. Actually, all these mentioned traits are the characteristics of autonomy in learning. In other words, the students developed their autonomy in foreign language learning while they were working at SAC. The following figures of percentage showed how students thought of their learning habit after being exposed by SAC: 75% of the students admitted SAC provided the environment for autonomous learning; 50% of the students becoming more confident to learn in autonomy because of the autonomous learning model given in SAC; 75% of the students becoming more eager in finding independent

learning resources. Most students were not independent learning at the first place. They were dependent on external supports like tutors, more capable peers, and classroom teachers.

### **The habit of independent learning began to grow after knowing SAC**

The students experienced changes in their learning habit after they knew SAC. They become more autonomous in their learning style, with limited scale of help from more capable peers or tutors, who were available at SAC. These tutors were the assistants who worked at SAC to develop independent materials and to provide consultation whenever the students needed. The students also sought for more independent resources by themselves and tried to solve learning problem by themselves. They only came to the counselors or tutors when they had difficulties. Since the students were put in SAC independent system every time they entered SAC and had to adjust themselves with the system, these students automatically developed their autonomous learning habit.

### **Self-Access Center: Support of Students' Autonomy in Learning**

The majority of students see Self Access Center will affect their language learning indirectly by making them more autonomous (87%).

SAC gives the students a model of autonomy in learning: The students select and get the materials by themselves. They do the materials according to the instruction. They use available resources (dictionaries, textbooks, counselors) for help. They check the answers by the available

answer-key. They return the materials themselves once they're done. They bring this habit outside SAC.

SAC generally support students in language learning. 65% of the students admitted SAC make them learn independently. 75% of the students admitted that SAC material' instructions are clear enough to understand. 75% of the students admitted that SAC's counselors are helpful and resourceful. The majority of students seeing Self Access Center will affect their language learning indirectly in more autonomy. The students generally come to SAC around one to twice a week.

Most students like the comfort, then the facilities and the learning media and the materials. In average, the students consider the material to be helpful, related (as back up) for the classroom teaching and supportive. The counselors at SAC are to assist as resource persons and to give learning counseling.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

The students' purposes of coming to a Self-Access Center facilities are to: spend leisure time, enjoy the comfort, use the learning media such as DVD for movies, computer games, board games, practice English, consult English subject, improve fluency of language skills. For higher level students and older ones of both upper and lower levels, they agree that autonomy in learning should be taking place. These steps are the model of autonomy in learning adapted by the students at SAC:

1. The students can decide the learning material by themselves.
2. The independent learning materials have clear instruction.
3. The purpose of autonomy in learning is not collaboration but independence.

The students are influenced by SAC in terms of autonomy in their learning habit. As the result, they developed these traits of autonomy in learning:

- a. have better time management
- b. improve confidence and use more language skills
- c. add more vocabulary
- d. improve their grammar
- e. Some students (2014) also reported to grow their learning motivation. arrange learning at their own pace and speed.

The students perceive SAC as the model of autonomy in learning. SAC does support autonomy in learning. Considering the future importance of SAC for supporting language learning, these are some recommendations to improve the function of SAC:

- a. SAC should upgrade the facilities and comfort such as lightning, room decoration and color, better Wi-fi connection, TV, and upgraded movie collection.
- b. SAC should hold more events, provide more learning media (board games and computer games)
- c. SAC should provide clearer instruction for its independent material (more simple expression).
- d. SAC should provide more learning resources such as books,

dictionaries, and other printed learning materials.

The Self Access Center is a powerful tool for any language learning institution to develop the students' autonomy language

learning. With a proper approach and right guidance, autonomy in learning will be achieved by the students and will bring a significant effect in language learning.

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